

The Use of Readers Theater in the EFL Curriculum

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Readers Theater combines elements both of storytelling and drama. For EFL teachers it is a useful tool because it motivates students by using language in a communicative and authentic context. It also incorporates the four skill areas and provides the students with a cultural component to their lesson.

Several misconceptions exist however, namely that Readers Theater is only for children or for those with extensive theatrical experience. But, teachers who use Readers Theater quickly find that adults have just as much fun as younger learners; common sense and creativity are the only prerequisites for the successful incorporation of this teaching technique. Further misconceptions about Readers Theater include the beliefs that students must memorize their parts, that scripts are difficult to find and adapt, and that a great deal of time and preparation are required to use this technique successfully. Conventional theatrical elements such as props and a stage are optional but not necessary. As illustrated here, teachers will realize that possible scripts exist in any material used in the classroom, and that these scripts may quickly be adapted by the students and performed soon afterwards. Readers Theater is not limited to those students with a high level of speaking proficiency; instead, students of all levels can participate in this activity which can involve the entire class.

Readers Theater provides an interactive way of introducing cultural knowledge by familiarizing the students with the folklore and literature of the target language. Students can gain insight into a diverse range of cultural topics such as gender relationships, historical events and contexts, social conflicts, and contemporary issues. Readers Theater further allows students to practice important aspects of linguistic competence including pronunciation, intonation, and the conveyance of emotional content via language. Further benefits can be observed in the affective sphere. Because students have scripts in hand, their confidence in delivering lines is reinforced. As a group activity, Readers Theater promises cooperation between teachers and students, since the responsibility for success is shared equally by all. Social bonds are created while traditional barriers are broken down between students and teachers.

Finding suitable scripts for Readers Theater may seem like a daunting prospect to many teachers. However, even if a source book of decent scripts does exist, it may not include the best choice of material for students, simply because it may not relate to any of their current course work. The best place to look for scripts is in the classroom itself. Novels, articles, debates, textbook reading, and short stories can all provide excellent sources. The resultant scripts may be extracted directly from the material, developed by the teacher, or (best of all) developed by the students themselves.

If a teacher happens to be using a play or dialogue, these are obviously adaptable into scripts for Readers Theater. The teacher and/or students merely need to edit the scripts into a suitable form

which can be presented to the class. Five to ten minute scripts often work best. Scripts may add a narrator to help introduce the scene, characters, and action.

In transforming books, articles, and texts into scripts, the only limitation is that students must be working with literature that contains or lends itself to dialogue. Most novels abound with episodes of characters conversing. Students need only to choose a passage with a sufficient number of characters that they want to depict. The passage may either be edited or embellished by the students to work the scene into a suitable form for presentation. Each participant should have an individual copy of the scene/script, perhaps mounted on colored cardboard.

As an example, one script used by the students of the Intensive English Program at West Virginia University was developed from James Thurber's (1945) *The Unicorn in the Garden*. In the actual text, the scene appears as follows:

When the police and the psychiatrist arrived they sat down in chairs and looked at her, with great interest, "My husband," she said, "saw a unicorn this morning." The police looked at the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist looked at the police. "He told me it ate a lily," she said. "He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead," she said. At a solemn signal from the psychiatrist the police leaped from their chairs and seized the wife. (pp. 268-269)

Because of time restrictions, the teacher reworked the scene into the following dialogue:

Wife: My husband saw a unicorn this morning.

Psychiatrist: Really?

Wife: He told me it ate a lily.

Psychiatrist: How interesting!

Wife: He told me it had a golden horn in the middle of its forehead.

Psychiatrist: I see.

Narrator: The psychiatrist leaped from his chair and seized the wife.

If time allows, however, it is always better to let the students in groups rewrite the scene, perhaps taken from a novel or short story that they are studying. One such scene taken from Pat Conroy's (1986) *Prince of Tides* is:

Mr. Newbury: Why did you hit my son? (blowing smoke toward Tom)

Todd: He and his brother ambushed me in the schoolyard, Dad. I was just walking by minding my own business, when his brother jumped me from behind and this one started hitting me in the face.

Mr. Newbury: Why didn't your brother come to apologize too? I never liked two against one.

Tom: Why do you want to lie about it, Todd? You know Luke wasn't anywhere near when all of that happened. Besides, Luke wouldn't have needed me. He could eat you alive boy,

and you know it. (pp. 233)

Ready-made scripts, even if available, will not be as useful to students as developing scripts of their own. In developing these scripts, students cultivate different aspects of writing such as summarizing, editing, and creative writing.

Performance of Readers Theater does not necessarily involve weeks of preparation, intricate costumes, or expensive scenery. In fact, only minimal direction is required. The staging of scenes may be classified into three types: non-theatrical, semi-theatrical, and theatrical. In any format, audience participation can play an integral role, such as being called upon to become involved through repetition of key phrases or sounds at intervals throughout the script, creating a dynamic interaction between performers and viewers.

Non-theatrical staging is probably the most common type of Readers Theater. ESL teachers may even be employing it now without realizing it. In this type, students read scenes while seated among their fellow students. There is no separation of actor and audience. High school English classes studying Shakespeare tend to use this type of Readers Theater extensively. Students may be called upon to read various characters with little or no preparation time.

Semi-theatrical staging is almost as easy as non-theatrical Readers Theater, but may require a larger amount of preparation on the students' part. For this type of staging, students read the scene standing or seated in front of an audience (the classroom). The students may choose to read facing the audience full front, facing the character with whom they are speaking, or facing away from the audience when not actually involved in the scene.

Theatrical staging is the most involved of the three, but it is also the staging students enjoy most. This type employs simple props, costumes, scenery, lighting, and music. Students' creativity is facilitated and their imaginations are engaged. Productions of this sort can be videotaped for later viewing by the class or staged outside of the usual class period so that other members of the school or outside community may attend.

Once a manageable script has been agreed upon, rehearsal can begin. Students are advised to read through their scripts in class as well as outside of class for practice in pronunciation, intonation, and clarity of speech. Students are coached as to body movements and gestures by teacher and classmates. Often a teacher may desire to precede the Readers Theater unit with a variety of pre- activities such as discussion of the author, cultural context, setting, dialect, or vocabulary-building exercises. These types of pre-activities build comprehension of the text itself and may assist the students in deciding how exactly they would like to portray their characters.

Readers Theater is a motivating technique which allows students to practice language in a unique way. Students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of both the content and the language of the text at hand while simultaneously drawing upon their listening, speaking, and reading facilities. Furthermore, writing exercises such as short compositions are possible as follow-up activities. Readers Theater is as accessible to beginning level as to advanced level students; the

difference lies merely in the selection of texts. Once this technique has been made use of in the EFL classroom, teachers and students will find that this leads to a deeper appreciation of language, content, and the process of learning.

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